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OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 230420b

Thursday 20.04.2023

Audience with participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

The following is the text of the address handed by the Pope to those present during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Mr. Cardinal,

Dear members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission,

I am pleased to welcome you at the end of your annual plenary Assembly. I thank Cardinal Luis Ladaria for his greeting and for the explanation he offered on the theme you have considered: "Sickness and suffering in the Bible". It is a theme that relates to everyone, believers and non-believers alike. Indeed, human nature, wounded by sin, carries inscribed within it the reality of limitations, frailty and death.

This theme responds, furthermore, to a concern that is particularly close to my heart, which is that illness and finitude in modern thinking are often seen as a loss, a non-value, a nuisance that must be minimized, countered and annulled at all costs. One does not want to ask the question about their meaning, perhaps because one fears their moral and existential implications. Yet no one can evade the search for this "why" (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, 9).

Even the believer can sometimes waver when faced with the experience of pain. It is a frightening reality, and when it breaks through and assails, it can leave one distraught, to the point of shattering one's faith. The person is then faced with a crossroads: he can either allow suffering to lead him to withdraw into himself, to the point of despair and rebellion; or he can welcome it as an opportunity for growth and discernment of what really matters

in life, to the point of an encounter with God.

The latter is the vision of faith we find in Holy Scripture.

Old Testament man lives sickness with his thoughts constantly turned to God: he trusts in Him in the moments of tears (cf. *Ps* 38), he implores Him healing from infirmity (cf. *Ps* 6:3; *Is* 38), and he often returns to Him, in moments of trial, with gestures of conversion (cf. *Ps* 38:5, 12; 39:9; *Is* 53:11).

In the New Testament, the event of Jesus breaks through (cf. *Jn* 3:16): the Son who reveals the love of the Father, his mercy, his forgiveness and his constant search for the sinful, lost and wounded man. It is not by chance that Christ's public activity is marked in large part precisely by contact with the sick. The miraculous healings are one of the main characteristics of his ministry (cf. *Mt* 9:35; 4:23): He cures the lepers and the paralytics (cf. *Mk* 1.490-42; 2;10-12); He heals Simon's mother-in-law and the centurion's servant (cf. *Mt* 8:5-15); He frees the possessed and cures all the sick who trust in Him (cf. *Mk* 6:56).

It is precisely his compassion for them and the numerous healings he performs that are presented as the *sign* that "God has visited his people" (*Lk* 7:16) and that the Kingdom of Heaven is near (cf. *Lk* 10:9); they reveal his divine identity, his messianic mission (cf. *Lk* 7:20-23) and his love for the weak, to the point of identifying with them, when he says: "I was sick and you took care of me" (*Mt* 25:36). The culmination of his identification takes place in the Passion, so that Christ's Cross becomes the quintessential sign of God's solidarity with us and, at the same time, our possibility of joining with Him in the work of salvation (cf. *Col* 1:24). Also, after the Resurrection, when the Lord entrusts to the disciples the mandate of continuing his work, He tells them to care for the sick, laying his hands on them and blessing them in his name (cf. *Mk* 16:15-18).

The Bible thus does not offer a banal and utopian answer to the question of sickness and death, nor a fatalistic response, that would justify everything by attributing it to an incomprehensible divine justice, or worse, an inexorable destiny before which there is nothing to be done other than to bow down without understanding. Biblical man, rather, feels invited to face the universal condition of pain as a place of encounter with the proximity and compassion of God, the good Father, who with infinite mercy takes charge of his wounded creatures in order to heal them, raise them up again, and save them.

Thus, in Christ, even suffering is transformed into love, and the end of the things of this world becomes a hope of resurrection and salvation, as we are reminded by the author of the book of Revelation (cf. *Rev* 21:4). In essence, for the Christian, even infirmity is a great gift of communion, with which God makes him a participant in the fullness of goodness precisely through the experience of weakness.

In reality, the way in which we live pain tells us about our possibility of loving and letting ourselves be loved, our ability to give meaning to the vicissitudes of existence in the light of charity, and our willingness to accept limitation as an opportunity for growth and redemption[1]. It is what Saint John Paul II emphasized when, based on his personal experience, he indicated the path of suffering as a way of opening oneself to a greater love (cf. Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, 20).

Finally, a last aspect of the experience of illness that I would like to highlight is that it teaches us to experience human and Christian solidarity, in accordance with God's style, which is closeness, compassion and tenderness. The parable of the good Samaritan reminds us that to stoop before the pain of others is not an optional choice for man, but rather an indispensable condition, both for his full realization as a person and for the construction of an inclusive society, truly oriented towards the common good (cf. Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 67-68).

Dear members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, I express to you all my personal thanks and encouragement for the demanding work you carry out in the service of the Word of God, through research and teaching. You are engaged in one of the most important areas of the inculturation of faith, which is a fundamental part of the Church's mission. Remember, however, that your work will grow to the extent that you are able to personally welcome the mystery of Incarnation in your life of faith.

Therefore, I wish you a fruitful continuation of your work, I invoke on you the light of the Holy Spirit, and I bless you from my heart. And, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you!
